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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001343

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MINISTER BAHIIYA HARIRI FOCUSED ON "BACK  
TO SCHOOL" PLANS

REF: BEIRUT 1171

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

#### SUMMARY

1. (C) Minister of Education Bahiya Hariri told the Ambassador on September 11 that if the Ministry of Education could make significant progress during the next school year, which coincides with the same ten-month period of the current national unity government, then she believed Lebanon would be on its way to achieving some form of sustainable development. To this end, the Ministry is focused on implementing new "back to school" initiatives, she said. Hariri cited curriculum development, teacher training, and bridging the disconnect between a Francophone education system and the demand for English-language training among her priorities. In addition, Hariri enthusiastically praised the recent efforts of her nephew, Sunni majority leader Saad Hariri, to initiate reconciliation between rival factions in the northern region of Tripoli. She welcomed President Sleiman's announcement of the start of National Dialogue and was optimistic that the 2009 elections would be held on time. End summary.

#### EDUCATION "CORNERSTONE" OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

2. (C) In a September 11 call by the Ambassador, accompanied by Poloff, Minister of Education Bahiya Hariri called education the "cornerstone" of sustainable development. Hariri, an educator by profession and the sister of assassinated former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, said Lebanon's students are Lebanon's fortune. Although her tenure as Minister of Education began in July 2008 and will last only until the spring 2009 parliamentary elections, Hariri was optimistic that improvement in Lebanon's educational system would pay dividends in the future in terms of awareness and civic participation. She said the short time frame of the national unity government neatly coincides with the length of the school year, and she is using this as her timeline.

#### "BACK TO SCHOOL"

3. (C) Hariri, and her aide Rubina Abu-Zeinab Chahine, said the ministry was currently focused on new "back to school" initiatives. The new school year, which begins in October for most Lebanese public and private schools, will bring

significant changes to individual schools, she said. At the most basic level, Hariri said, schools will receive new signs that carry the name of the school and the emblem of the Ministry of Education. In addition, Hariri would like each school to have a wall with the Lebanese flag painted on it. Hariri was adamant that these two improvements, although simple, are the first step to increasing student awareness and encouraging unity.

14. (C) More complicated, Hariri noted, is the introduction and implementation of a standardized curriculum from the elementary to university levels (reftel). However, Hariri was proud of existing teacher training programs, and noted that 90 percent of the ministry's budget goes towards teacher salaries, training, and resources. However, she said, the budget does not have enough for development initiatives. One challenge the ministry faces, she noted, is how to shift the traditionally Francophone education system to meet the increasing demand for English.

15. (C) Hariri was well-versed in several of the USG-sponsored educational programs in Lebanon, including the ACCESS Microscholarships, i-EARN, English-language program and USAID's school rehabilitation project, LEAD, especially in her native Sidon. She told the Ambassador she was fully supportive of expanding these programs and also gives "full backing" to the Teach for Lebanon program.

HARIRI PROUD OF SAAD;  
OPTIMISTIC ABOUT NATIONAL  
DIALOGUE AND ELECTIONS  
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16. (C) Hariri was visibly proud of her nephew, March 14 and Sunni majority leader Saad Hariri's September 8 reconciliation agreement between rival Sunni and Alawite factions in Tripoli, calling his visit "historic." She believed the next step for Tripoli should include a plan for development and dialogue, similar to what has happened in Sidon. She also praised his unprecedented visit to the Bekaa.

17. (C) Politicians, Hariri said, may have been surprised by President Michel Sleiman's announcement that the National Dialogue will begin on September 16; but the Lebanese people were not. In her view, it would be better to bring all of the issues of concern to the dialogue, and not just the issue of Hizballah's weapons, she said. Despite "healthy" discussion in the cabinet about possibility of holding the 2009 elections in one day, Hariri voiced her concern that this would be logistically difficult in terms of security and human resources. However, she characterized the discussion of these issues as a good sign that the elections would be held on time.

SISON